

Shabbat Parah is the third of the four special Shabbatot before Pesach. It reminds us that in Temple times all Israelites had to be ritually pure in order to partake in the *pesach* sacrifice. Today, we remember this as we begin to meticulously clean our homes in preparation for Pesach. The reading from Numbers deals with the red heifer, whose ashes mixed in living water serve to purify those who have had contact with a corpse. Coming into contact with a dead human being renders a person ritually impure, similar to the impurity caused by contact with someone having a skin disease or a discharge; but despite the obvious danger of physical contamination posed by the latter, contact with even the tiniest bit of human remains is considered far more perilous. Why? Our sages teach that for as long as we live, we have a soul, that holy spark that connects us to our Divine Creator. When we die, the soul departs, and the body becomes an inanimate object. Because this inanimate object was once a living person imbued with a spark of holiness, our ancestors viewed a corpse as being in a state of perpetual impurity, i.e. no longer able to return to a state of ritual purity. Whereas the Egyptians went to great lengths to preserve and provide for their dead in accordance with their concept of the afterlife, we do the exact opposite, allowing the body to disintegrate into the cells from which it grew. In short, holiness is not contained in inanimate objects; holiness is a state of being. This is the overarching subject of our parashah.

We usually associate Parashah Ki Tissa with the unsavory incident of the golden calf. But that episode is only another symptom of the fear and impatience that have continually plagued this motley group of newly freed slaves since they left Egypt. How could it be otherwise? Their lives as slaves were hard, but predictable. Now, they are in uncharted waters, and their leader seems to have abandoned them. Driven by their immature understanding of how to serve their unseen God and unsure of the future, they yearn for something tangible, tragically unaware that the result is actually the antithesis of the holy guidance they hope to invoke. The *mishkan* is to be an oasis of holiness in the desert, moving with the people as they travel and providing a focal point for worship. Two weeks ago, we read about the *keruvim*, those winged creatures facing each other and fashioned out of one piece of gold. Like the two winged figures in Parashah Bereshit that guard the entrance to Eden, their purpose is not only to protect, but also, and more importantly, to serve as a frame for the space they delineate. The true essence of the *mishkan* is the area between the *keruvim*, where the Presence of HaShem dwells. Despite all they symbolize, the figures themselves as well as all the utensils, garments, and rites are nothing more than the structure outlining the space in which holiness may exist. In contrast, that piece of solid gold, which according to Aaron's somewhat fanciful description, simply "came out of" the fire in the shape of a calf, is the polar opposite. It is just a piece of metal that looks like a calf, as lifeless as the blind, deaf, and dumb idols described in Psalm 115. Despite Aaron's "the dog ate my homework" description of its origin, it is merely the lifeless product of human hands; worshipping it and expecting it to respond is futile – something our ancestors only learn by fits and starts.

After detailing to Moses the duties of the two artisans chosen to oversee the building of the *mishkan*, HaShem suddenly changes the subject to Shabbat. The verse begins with the word *however*. This word is the key to the message both of the calf and of the heifer. Caught up in the enthusiasm of building the *mishkan*, the people stop short when they begin to miss Moses, and in desperation they literally take measures into their own hands and make themselves an object to worship. In the meantime, Moses is hearing, "**Ach**, *et shabtotai tishmoru* **However**, keep My Shabbats." In other words, go ahead and build, **but** then, stop to rest and refresh yourselves. Just as HaShem rested after six days of creation, so too must we cease working on Shabbat. Viewed in this light, the *mishkan*, Shabbat and other days of rest are acts of *imitatio dei* – of our striving to be as like HaShem as we can humanly be. "*V'shamru v'nei yisrael et hashabbat ...*" We sing this every Shabbat, because we understand that there is a time to rest as well as a time to build. Shabbat is the sign of our eternal covenant with HaShem. And because we know that only HaShem can create ex nihilo, we understand that the inanimate objects we create with that which HaShem provides can only frame holiness, they cannot contain or dispense it. Likewise, when a soul leaves a human being, the inanimate body that once contained it is no longer needed, and must return to the elements from which it came. All of creation is ephemeral; only HaShem is eternal, and therefore holy. Shabbat and our festivals are the holy framework within which we worship our Creator, dressed in special clothing and using specific objects that illustrate holiness, but are not themselves intrinsically holy. Holiness is not a thing; it is a mindset, a state of being, in the special places we choose to designate as holy – our bodies, our homes, our houses of worship and study, and in nature. And as we observe cycles of work and rest, we are holy to HaShem, our holy God.

Shabbat shalom!